

## WORDSWORTH'S "IMMORTAL ODE."

### ESSAY III.

That which is specially interesting to parents in this great ode is, that the words seem to convey the very impressions one would wish to leave upon the unsullied child-mind. Here, set to loveliest word-music, is the child's guide to knowledge of itself. Here, ready for her voice to utter, lies the mother's first lesson to her child.

The words are so simple, the similes so perfectly and peculiarly comprehensible to the very young intelligence, that one might imagine the poet intended to appeal to children only.

We tell the child "our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting." And we are readily believed; for children themselves often forget through after-sleep the broken rest of a night. Something disturbed them; they awoke and talked may be; but to-morrow they have forgotten. Their memory pictures the night as one unbroken sleep.

The little word "our" has magic in it; it is the touch of Nature which makes the teacher kin with the one who is taught. As we give utterance to it the listening child feels itself raised to our level; we traverse common ground; sympathy is aroused and sympathy creates conviction.

From picturing this sleep which heralds our birth we go on to describe the soul. Surely no light task! But here again the poet supplies us with a word-image, for which the child-mind is quite prepared—

Our soul is our life's star.  
What child is there so unobservant as not to notice the stars?  
Are not all children deeply impressed by their first experience of starlight? We all know the little Christmas-party reveller, returning home through unaccustomed darkness, who will suddenly cease the prattle about dolls and dances to gaze up

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into the sky, and we notice the sweet awe in his voice as he says, "How beautiful the stars are to-night."

The black darkness of the night, unlit by any star, the children know too; and it is pleasant to reveal to them that so would our life be without soul; just so gloomy, just so sombre, but for the soul which rises with blank memory, and yet with steady radiance within us.

"Our life's star hath had elsewhere its setting."

The child is quite ready for this idea too. He is familiar with the beauty of the sunset, and readily recalls how gently and mysteriously the golden orb disappears from sight. How naturally then we follow its course; how we tell the child that, though we see its beams no longer, other eyes are gladdened by them, other lands are lightened, other days awake. So with our own life's star, for (we tell him) the sun is but a star.

When once this beautiful simile is suggested to the child how involuntarily it is recalled every time we watch the sunset together. "The sun is setting! In heaven some child-soul is setting too, by-and-by to appear with us on earth."

The soul that rises with us, our life's star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting, and cometh from afar.

Is not this this the loveliest and most perfect description of its birthday that ever was framed for a child? Compare with it all the nursery fables on the subject, and say which is most worthy of the ear of a child.

The influence the truths contained in these few lines has on children is marvellous, and the visible growth of mind therefrom is rich payment to the parent for the moments spent in implanting them.

*At the fire of living thought, living thought is kindled.* From Wordsworth to the child the vivifying flame passes on, and the teacher is the happy medium.

Take your child of five or seven and repeat to her the first four lines of this fifth stanza; give to your voice the very gentlest note of its gamut. As you speak, gaze still upon your little pupil, and you will see by her changing countenance how eagerly and wonderingly she listens to the tale. The words alone have so much melody of a gentle, rippling sort, they will stir the listener on your knee as Wordsworth's "Lucy" was

stirred by the brooklet on the hillside—"beauty born of murmuring sound shall pass into her face."

Some few weeks after teaching my little girl these lines I had pleasant proof how well they had been understood. The children were discussing among themselves the places they had visited, and were indignant with the youngest among them because she declared that she also had been in another country than her own. Presently the child appealed to me, with such a soft, eager look upon her face that my attention was attracted. "Mother, I have been in another country—you know—I was in heaven. I was in heaven before I came here." So confidently and happily she spoke, I could not but rejoice. Knowledge was power indeed to her; citizen of no mean city she seemed as she thus claimed her far-off home.

Trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God who is our Home,  
Heaven lies about us in our infancy.

Thus writes the poet after he has come to years of discretion; thus he describes from a distance the childhood through which he has passed. But as a child he knew not the glory in which he dwelt.

"*Si la jeunesse savait!*" If we only could discover to the little ones their vanishing birthright, that they may treasure its possession and not merely love its memory!

The brightest "glory-cloud" our children bring is their capacity for happiness. Blind they may be, deaf, dumb, or crippled; they may inherit from virtuous parents or wicked ancestors good or bad dispositions; but the capacity of being happy comes to all.

And I think this, especially, is a gift which can be incorporated, a "cloud" which can, as it were, be condensed into soft dew, which may sink into the soul to which in infancy it is but a golden nimbus.

The habit of happiness should be as industriously inculcated as that of cleanliness. The state of being happy should be pointed out for the children's joyful recognition. "What dirty hands you have!" is so often the salutation we give to "infancy," rather than the equally true one which we might have ready, "How happy you are!"

Convince the children that they are happy, not by accident,

but because happiness is inherited, imported with us "from God who is our Home."

Tell them it is the Heavenly Parent's parting benediction; the coat of many colours which He lays upon the soul ere it "cometh from afar." And a coat it is, moreover, which should with careful wear withstand the wear and tear of the wilderness. Nourished by such a creed gratitude and love towards the Creator spring lustily in the joyous child-mind and assist its growth towards heaven. Part of the daily prayers of "our infancy" should ever be thanksgiving for specified happiness. A parent should consider the day ill-spent which has not yielded some heartfelt happiness to the child.

Thus perceiving that happiness is "the state to which we are called," the children will quickly learn that goodness goes with it, hand in hand. Sin, therefore, for them will mean everything which interferes with this holy happiness and will be divested of its sometime fascination.

Another "cloud of glory" which hovers round our children is that of innocence. This is the cloud whose rainbow colouring we elders most admire. Coming between us and them, it lends us in their eyes perfection and honesty greater than we are credited with by the world at large. Viewed through this cloud-mirror—

Earth and every common sight  
To me did seem  
Appareled in celestial light.

Bereft of this gift—

The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

Not that "the things" have vanished; 'tis only that our eyes, aided no longer by this medium, have lost their power of penetration. A man is not only what he *is*, but what he fain *would be*. "The evil that I would, not that I do." The children see us not as we are, not as our contemporaries would describe us, but as we ourselves long to be. We wear our heart upon our sleeve for them; their innocence teaches them to read aright.

M. R.